Lecture: Online

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Consultation and Feedback hours:
Course Overview

This course introduces some of the main ideas in contemporary political theory. In the Autumn Term, we will examine some of the key concepts in political theory, including freedom, equality, and democracy. Questions to be considered include: How should we treat fellow citizens? Do we have a moral obligation to obey the law, and when should we disobey it? What should be the punishment if we do? Are nations and cultures morally significant? On what basis should citizens be treated equally? Is democracy a means to an end or an end in itself? What obligations do we have to the global poor? Equipped with answers to these questions and an understanding of the key concepts, we will focus in the Spring Term on the theoretical debates occasioned by the publication of Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (1971). These include critical objections raised by communitarian, feminist, egalitarian, realist, and agonist writers and philosophers of race.

Autumn Term – Concepts in Political Theory

1. Utilitarianism
2. Human Rights
3. Equality
4. Democracy
5. The Nation and Multiculturalism

Reading week

6. Political Obligation
7. Civil Disobedience
8. Punishment
9. Global Justice
10. Methods in Political Theory and Review

Christmas holiday

Spring Term – Liberalism and its Critics

11. Liberty and the Foundations of Liberalism
12. Rawls on Justice
13. Communitarianism
14. Feminism
15. Race and Liberalism

Reading week

16. Libertarianism
17. Egalitarianism
18. Public Reason Liberalism
19. Political Realism
20. Democratic Agonism
READING LIST

AUTUMN TERM

1. Utilitarianism

The question: What's the right thing to do?

Utilitarianism holds that the morally (and politically) best thing to do is whatever maximises overall happiness or well-being. Beginning in the nineteenth century with Jeremy Bentham and J.S. Mill, utilitarianism has had a powerful (and sometimes malign) impact on political philosophy and public policy.

Required reading:

W. Kymlicka, ‘Utilitarianism’ in Contemporary Political Philosophy

Supplementary reading:

For a detailed background and the key tenets of utilitarianism:

W. Sinnott-Armstrong, ‘Consequentialism’ in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy


R. Plant, Modern Political Thought, Ch. 4

D. E. Miller, Utilitarianism and Consequentialism’ in Gerald F. Gaus and Fred D'Agostino (eds) Routledge Companion to Social and Political Philosophy

W. Kymlicka, Contemporary Political Philosophy, Ch. 2

T. Mulgan, Understanding Utilitarianism, Chs, 5, 6

D. Knowles, Political Philosophy, Ch. 2

M. Sandel, Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?, Ch. 6

A. Brown, Modern Political Philosophy, Ch. 2


J. J. C. Smart ‘An Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics’ in J. J. C. Smart and B. Williams, Utilitarianism: For and Against


2. Human Rights

The question: What are rights and what use are they?

We live today in a culture of rights in which people are more and more ready to claim things as their right. But can anything be a right? After all, if I have a right to something then someone else is under a duty to provide it. Moreover, Marxists, feminists and communitarians have all been critical of the idea of human rights. This week we will examine the meaning of rights and the philosophical foundations which have been used to defend them.

Required reading:
A. Shorten, ‘Rights’ in Contemporary Political Theory (Palgrave, 2015), Ch.10

Supplementary reading:
K. Woods, Human Rights, Chs. 1, 3
J. Donnelly, ‘Human rights’ in J. Dryzek et al (eds), Oxford Handbook of Political Theory
J. Donnelly, Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice, Ch. 3
P. Jones, Rights, Chs. 4, 5
M. Freeman, Human Rights
D. Knowles, Political Philosophy, Ch. 4
J. Donnelly, The Concept of Human Rights, Chs. 1, 4
J. Nickel, Making Sense of Human Rights (2nd edn), Chs. 1-3 (Ch. 2 on Moodle)

On the question of whether human rights differ between cultures:
A. Sen, ‘Human Rights and Asian Values’
L. J. Macfarlane, The Theory and Practice of Human Rights, Ch.1

On the debate between political and humanistic conceptions of human rights:
3. Equality

The question: Are we all equals and who should get what?

Equality is a central ideal in political theory. But it is a complex idea with many different meanings. This session on equality will use the concept to introduce wider questions of social justice. In doing so we will distinguish between equality of outcome and equality of opportunity as well as consider conservatives and libertarians who reject certain ideals of equality altogether.

**Required reading:**

B. Williams, ‘The Idea of Equality’

**Supplementary reading:**

S. Gosepath, ‘Equality’ in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

J. Baker, *Arguing for Equality*, Ch. 1 & 3


P. Casal & A. Williams, ‘Equality’ in C. McKinnon (ed.), *Issues in Political Theory*


W. Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Ch. 3 esp. 88-96

C. Farrelly, *Introduction to Contemporary Political Theory*, Ch. 4

H. Frankfurt, ‘Equality as a Moral Ideal’ *Ethics* 98/1 (1987), 21-43


H. Frankfurt, ‘Equality as a Moral Ideal’ *Ethics* 98/1 (1987), 21-43


A. Phillips, *Which Equalities Matter?*, Ch. 3

R. Wilkinson & K. Pickett, *The Spirit Level: why equality is better for everyone*


4. Democracy

The question: Is democracy the only morally justified form of government?

Few dispute today that democracy is a fairer way of making political decisions than rule by a small elite, but why should that be? Are greater numbers of people more likely to be right, or it is simply intrinsically just that everybody should be involved. How about the politically incompetent? Further, should we encourage or discourage ordinary people to participate in politics, beyond simply voting. Is democracy centrally about voting, or about common deliberation? Either way, can decisions taken by the majority always be justified to the minority who loses out?

Required reading:


Supplementary reading:


R. Dahl, On Democracy, Pt II

R. Dahl, Democracy and its Critics, Pts 3, 4

R. Harrison, Democracy, Chs. I, VIII-XI


A. Birch, Concepts and Theories of Modern Democracy, Chs. 7-9

A. Przeworski et al (eds.), Democracy, Accountability and Representation, Introduction

D. Held, Models of Democracy (3rd edn 2006), Ch. 9

A Phillips, Engendering Democracy


S. Benhabib, ‘Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy’, in S. Benhabib (ed.), Democracy and Difference

S. Rosenberg (ed.), Deliberation, Participation and Democracy, Introduction and Chapters by Cohen, Dryzek, Mansbridge and Warren


5. The Nation and Multiculturalism

The question: Does your nation or your culture matter morally?

The nation state is under pressure from many sides: globalization, international institutions, multinational corporations, and social movements. Still, it remains the main political entity of our world. But what is the theoretical foundation for this pre-eminence? Related to this, how should nations respond to the existence of different internal cultures? Should ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious minorities have exemptions from the law? We shall evaluate the multicultural critique of 'difference-blind' liberalism, explore the role that toleration has performed in debates over multiculturalism and examine the relationship between nations and cultures.

Required readings:


Supplementary readings:


B. Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism


S. Caney, Justice Beyond Borders

M. Canovan, ‘Patriotism Is Not Enough’, British Journal of Political Science, 30, 413-432

E. J. Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780 - Programme, Myth, Reality

J. Hutchinson & A. D. Smith (Eds.), Nationalism


B. Barry, Culture and Equality, Chs 1-2, 7-8
6. Political Obligation

The question: Should you obey the law?

The state exercises coercion over its citizens to and forces them to obey the law, but we have no choice but to obey it. However, that does not mean we have good moral (as opposed to prudential) reasons to obey it. The problem of political obligation is finding what those moral reasons are. Candidates include tacit consent, fair play, democracy and an associativist ideal of membership.

Required reading:

J. Wolff, ‘Justifying the State’, in Wolff, Introduction to Political Philosophy

Supplementary reading:

R. Dagger & D. Lefkowitz, ‘Political Obligation’ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Fair play arguments:


R. Dagger, Membership, Fair Play and Political Obligation’ Political Studies 48/1 (2000)

Consent arguments:


M. Murphy, ‘Surrender of Judgment and the Consent Theory of Political Obligation’ Law and Philosophy, 16, (1999), 115-43


Associative arguments:

J. Seglow, Defending Associative Duties, Ch. 7

7. Civil Disobedience

The question: When should you break the law?

Civil disobedience consists of breaking the law in order to try to change a law that you consider unjust. Normally, if we do have political obligations, then breaking the law is unjust. How then can civil disobedience be justified? Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. became famous for their courageous fights against discrimination and oppression. One of their key modes of political engagement was civil disobedience. But what exactly is it? And under what conditions may we legitimately engage in it?

Required reading:


Supplementary reading:

K. Brownlee, ‘Civil Disobedience’ in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy


P. Smith, Moral and Political Philosophy: Key Issues, Concepts and Theories, chapter on Civil Disobedience


T. Milligan, Civil Disobedience: Protest, Justice and the Law

P. Singer, Democracy and Disobedience, Pt II

H. Bedau, ‘Civil Disobedience and Personal Responsibility for Injustice’ in H. Bedau (ed.), Civil Disobedience: in focus

P. Singer, Disobedience as a Plea for Reconsideration’ in H. Bedau (ed.), Civil Disobedience: in focus

J. Moreall, The Justification of Violent Civil Disobedience in H. Bedau (ed.), Civil Disobedience: in focus


W. Smith, ‘Civil Disobedience in the Public Sphere’ Journal of Political Philosophy 19/2 (2011), 145-166
8. Punishment

**The question:** Is it right to punish people who break the law?

The state's authority to punish those who violate its laws is the ultimate measure of its power. But on what grounds precisely should law-breakers be punished? As a matter of retribution? As an expression of communal disapproval? To deter others? Or is punishment ultimately a matter of rehabilitating offenders?

**Required reading:**


**Supplementary reading:**


J. Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives*, Ch. 18


N. Walker, ‘Reduction and Deterrence’ in R. A. Duff & D. Garland (eds) *A Reader on Punishment*

P. Hirst, ‘The Concept of Punishment’ in R. A. Duff & D. Garland (eds) *A Reader on Punishment*


9. Global Justice

**The question:** Do borders affect our moral obligations to people?

Social justice is concerned with how goods should be distributed within a society, but the largest inequalities in resources and opportunities exist between and not within states. Many people argue, therefore, that justice should be global in scope so that we should aim to equalise the position of all the world’s inhabitants, or at the very least to alleviate the position of the very poorest.

**Required reading:**


**Supplementary reading:**

C. Fabre, *Justice in a Changing World*, Ch.5


P. Van Parijs, ‘International Distributive Justice’ in R. Goodin, P. Pettit and T. Pogge (eds.) *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*

P. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, Ch. 8

J. Mandle, *Global Justice*, Chs. 2, 7

G. Brock, ‘Global Justice’ in C. McKinnon (ed.), *Issues in Political Theory*


B. Barry, ‘Humanity and Justice in Global Perspective’ in R. Goodin and P. Pettit (eds.) *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*


S. Caney, *Justice Beyond Borders: a Global Political Theory*, Ch. 4


T. Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*, Ch. 8

D. Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, Ch. 9


10. Methods in Political Theory and Review

The question: Political theory: what's that then?

Having done several weeks of substantive political theory, we will take this week to look back on the course so far and to review it, but also to prepare the ground for the Spring Term, by asking, what is political theory and how does it differ from political science? During this session we will focus on analytic political theory as a discipline, and discuss its aims and methods. Political theory and political science will be compared. Students will be introduced to the notion of ‘essentially contested concepts’, the distinction between concepts and conceptions, the method of ‘reflective equilibrium’, and guided through the structure of the course. There will also be essay preparation.

Required reading:


Supplementary reading:


J. Floyd & M. Stears, ‘Introduction’ in Political Philosophy versus History? Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought, 1-10


D. McDermott, ‘Analytic Political Philosophy’, in Leopold and Stears (eds), Political Theory: Methods and Approaches
**SPRING TERM**

**II. Liberty and the Foundations of Liberalism**

*The question: What does it mean to be free?*

Liberty is one of the most important and contested concepts in politics, and different political theorists seem to have in mind quite different things when discussing it. This week we will identify the various ways in which the concept has been understood, referring to Berlin’s distinction between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ liberty, the relationship between internal and external restraints, first and second order desires, and republican conceptions of liberty. We will also briefly examine the relationship between liberty and liberalism and what political theorists mean when they talk about liberalism.

*Required reading:*


*Supplementary reading:*

For the ideas that characterise liberalism:


On the implications of negative liberty for the liberty of the poor:


I. Carter, ‘Positive and Negative Liberty’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*


J. Gray, *Berlin*, chapter 1

S. Lukes, ‘Equality and Liberty: must they conflict?’, in D. Held (ed.), *Political Theory Today*


C. Taylor, ‘What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty?’, in Miller, D. (ed.), *Liberty*


Q. Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism*, chapter 2

12. Rawls on Justice

The question: What rules would a just society follow? And how do we find out?

This week introduces in detail the key thinker of the Spring Term. The influence of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* on subsequent political theory is impossible to overstate. Because the text is difficult, it is advisable to consult some of the introductory background texts listed if you have not come across Rawls before. This week, we will set out Rawls's project, exploring his two principles of 'justice as fairness', and examine the role of the 'original position' in Rawls's argument. We will discuss 'maximin', primary goods, and the just savings principle among others.

Required reading:

J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, excerpts — see Required Reading on Moodle

Supplementary reading:

S. Freeman, Rawls (good for detailed explanations of Rawls's thought)

L. Wenar, 'John Rawls' in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

A. Swift & S. Mulhall, *Liberals and Communitarians*, chapter on *A Theory of Justice*

W. Kymlicka, 'The Social Contract Tradition', in P. Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*


N. Daniels (ed.), *Reading Rawls*, esp. essay by R. Dworkin and T. Nagel


J. Mandle & D. Reidy, *A Companion to Rawls*


13. Communitarianism

The question: Is the community more morally significant than the individual?

The communitarian challenge to liberalism dominated political theory during the 1980s and early 1990s. We will focus on some of Michael Sandel’s criticisms of Rawls. According to Rawls, when figuring out the principles of justice appropriate for the regulation of a well-ordered democratic society, we should imagine that we are unaware of our class, gender, religion, age, wealth and conception of the good (we are hidden behind the ‘veil of ignorance’). Sandel, however, argues that since individuals are ‘partly constituted’ by the communities of which they form a part, it is impossible to leave one’s culture behind when selecting principles of justice. How can we select principles of justice that will be in our best interests if we do not know anything about who we are? Who is right and can the dispute be resolved?

Required reading:


Supplementary reading:

M. Sandel, Liberalism and the Limits of Justice

A. MacIntyre, After Virtue

D. Bell, ‘Communitarianism’, in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

A. Swift & S. Mulhall, Liberals and Communitarians, chapter on Sandel

D. Bell, Communitarianism and its Critics


14. Feminism

The question: Can you be a liberal and feminist?

Do liberal theories of justice neglect the role that gender plays in society? This is the claim made by Susan Moller Okin and other liberal feminists, who try to modify Rawls’s theory to incorporate feminist concerns. Do liberal feminists succeed in their project of constructive criticism, or are radical feminists right that liberalism is incapable of meeting the feminist challenge? We will discuss some answers to these questions and distinguish between different schools of feminist thought.

Required reading:


Supplementary reading:

M. Dietz, ‘Current Controversies in Feminist Theory’ *American Review of Political Science*, vol. 6, 399-431

L. Finlayson, *An Introduction to Feminism*

C. Chambers, ‘Gender’ in McKinnon (ed.) *Issues in Political Theory*

M. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*

M. Frye, ‘Sexism’ and ‘Oppression’ in *The Politics of Reality*.

V. Bryson, *Feminist Political Theory: An Introduction*

H. Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought*


A. Jagger, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, chs. 3, 6


I. Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to Post-Feminism*.

C. Weedon, *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of Difference*

C. Farrelly, *Introduction to Contemporary Political Theory*, ch. 8

J. Mansbridge & S.M. Okin, ‘Feminism’ in Goodin and Pettit (eds.) *Companion*, 269-90

T.E. Higgins, *Gender, Why Feminists Can’t (or Shouldn’t) be Liberals*
15. Race and Liberalism

The question: Can liberalism address racial injustice?

Over the last two decades a critique has emerged that argues that liberalism, both in its contemporary and historical forms, has either overlooked racial hierarchies or actively sought to uphold them. This week we will look at whether Rawls’s theory of justice can accommodate these critiques, and discuss related issues of rectification and affirmative action. The key debate is between Tommie Shelby, who (like Okin) argues that Rawls’s theory can be reformed and Charles W. Mills who argues that Rawls’s ‘ideal theory’ obscures the racial injustice inherent to the liberal tradition.

Required reading:


And watch the following brief video: Link

Supplementary reading:


C. Lebron, The Color of Our Shame: Race and Justice in our Time

C. Mills , “Ideal Theory” as Ideology’, Hypatia, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Summer, 2005), pp. 165-184

C. Pateman & C. Mills, Contract and Domination

C. Mills, The Racial Contract


T. Shelby, We Who are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press


K.A. Appiah, In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture

L. Blum, I’m not a Racist, But…The Moral Quandary of Race
16. Libertarianism

The question: Is all taxation theft?

Robert Nozick’s *Anarchy, State and Utopia* addresses fundamental questions about the just society from a libertarian perspective. We concentrate on his criticisms of Rawls and other ‘patterned’ theories of justice, the justification of his ‘entitlement theory’, the Wilt Chamberlain argument, and the difficulties of Nozick’s libertarianism.

Required reading:


Supplementary reading:


J. Wolff, *Robert Nozick: Property, Justice and the minimal state*, ch. 4

J. Paul (ed.), *Reading Nozick: Essays on Anarchy, State, and Utopia*


M. Otsuka, *Libertarianism without Inequality* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2003), ch. 1
17. Egalitarianism

The question: What's the point of equality?

Having discussed equality as a value in Week 3, we will revisit the idea by discussing egalitarian critiques of Rawls. While A Theory of Justice sparked a major debate about distributive justice – what was to be distributed and what principles should guide that distribution? – egalitarians, led Elizabeth Anderson, began to question whether liberalism’s understanding of equality was the right one. What Anderson and others pointed to was the relational character of equality, as a value shared among people in societies, not as a means of deciding who gets what.

Required reading:

E. Anderson, ‘What’s the Point of Equality?’

Supplementary reading:

E. Anderson, ‘The Fundamental Disagreement Between Luck Egalitarians and Relational Egalitarians’

M. O’Neill, ‘What Should Egalitarians Believe?’

L. Finlayson, ‘Why I Am Not a Liberal’ (available on Moodle)


J. Wolff, ‘Fairness, Respect, and the Egalitarian Ethos’


18. Public Reason Liberalism

**The question:** What should we do if everyone disagrees about what we should do?

Rawls, in *Political Liberalism* (1993), attempted to respond to his critics. His revised and updated theory of justice as fairness argued that the problem of political stability and the problem of political legitimacy were harder to resolve than he had thought. His theory of political liberalism builds on *A Theory of Justice* to argue that despite ‘the fact of reasonable pluralism’, citizens can reach an ‘overlapping consensus’ on a political conception of justice that does not depend on controversial metaphysical beliefs. Issues: truth and politics; legitimacy; moral pluralism; stability; public reason; public justification.

**Required reading:**

J. Rawls, ‘Political Not Metaphysical’

**Supplementary reading:**


D. Thompson, *John Rawls’s Political Liberalism*


P. Weithman, *Why Political Liberalism? On John Rawls’s Political Turn*
19. Political Realism

The question: What’s morality got to do with politics anyway?

Building on the work of Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss, political realists argue that liberal theorists, including Rawls, make a fundamental methodological error when devising their theories: they apply the conclusions of ethics to the sphere of politics. Contrary to this view, political realists argue that politics and morality are distinctive spheres of human activity which require separate treatments. On this view, much of contemporary political theory fails to recognise the inherent features of the political, rendering their ideal theories redundant in the real world.

Required reading:

B. Williams, ‘Realism and Moralism in Political Theory’ in B. Williams, In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Theory

Supplementary reading:


G. Newey, After Politics: The Rejection of Politics in Contemporary Liberal Philosophy


D. Runciman, ‘What is Realistic Political Philosophy?’, Metaphilosophy, Vol.43, No. 1 (2012), 58-70

M. Sleat, Liberal Realism: A Realist Theory of Liberal Politics

R. Geuss, Philosophy and Real Politics

L. Finlayson, The Political Is Political


20. Democratic Agonism

The question: Is politics all about conflict?

This week we focus on the theory of ‘agonistic democracy’. Is it possible to reach consensus without exclusion? Do all forms of politics, including liberal democracy, presuppose the friend/enemy relation? According to Chantal Mouffe, conflict is not merely an inevitable feature of the democratic process, but its essence. The more important – and possibly troubling – part of her argument is that democracy is threatened by attempts to arrive at consensus.

Required reading:

C. Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox, Ch. 1, ‘Democracy, Power, and The Political’

Supplementary reading:

W. Connolly, Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox


A. Finlayson, Democracy and Pluralism: The Political Thought of William E. Connolly


C. Mouffe, Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practices, from her Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically

C. Mouffe, On the Political

C. Mouffe, ‘Democracy, power, and the ‘political’”, in S. Benhabib (ed.) Democracy and difference: contesting the boundaries of the political

C. Mouffe, ‘Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern?, in Andrew Ross (ed), Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism

E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics (Chapters 3 & 4)

J. Torfing, New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek (Chs. 13&14)

A.M. Smith, Laclau and Mouffe: the Radical Democratic Imaginary
21. Review lecture and exam preparation

In the first week of the Summer Term (after the Easter break) I will deliver a revision lecture. This will be arranged nearer the time.